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An Analysis of Female Characters in Thomas
Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*

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RESUMEN

La finalidad de esta tesis será el análisis de la novela de Thomas Hardy *Jude the Obscure*. Más concretamente, el estudio y comparación de los dos personajes protagonistas femeninos: Sue Bridehead y Arabella Donn, dos mujeres atrapadas en un contexto determinista y naturalista, marcadas por sus diferentes orígenes y posiciones en la obra. Sue es la individualista, la mujer con ideas muy avanzadas para su tiempo, mientras que Arabella forma parte del folclore rural, y está siempre dispuesta a adaptarse para poder sobrevivir. El trabajo mostrará cómo la dicotomía entre ambas mujeres ofrece una crítica abierta a instituciones como el matrimonio. Asimismo, Hardy ofrece un final que no deja indiferente. La incapacidad de Jude de adaptarse solo le traerá desgracias. La última novela de Thomas Hardy muestra, por consiguiente, la incertidumbre del *fin-de-siècle* y las diferentes reacciones que sus personajes principales muestran ante esta época de grandes cambios.

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this dissertation will be the analysis of *Jude the Obscure*, by Thomas Hardy and, more specifically, the comparative study between the two main female characters: Sue Bridehead and Arabella Donn, two women trapped in a determinist and naturalist context and marked by their different origins and positions in the book. Sue is the individual, a woman ahead of her time, whereas Arabella is member of the folk and always willing to adapt in order to survive. Moreover, this work will show how the dichotomy encapsulated by these two women launches an open critique against institutions such as marriage. Likewise, Hardy offers an ending that does not leave readers indifferent. Jude's incapacity to readjust will only bring about disgrace. This novel will therefore show the uncertainty prompted by the *fin-de-siècle* and the different reactions that the characters show towards these drastic changes.

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1. Introduction

Thomas Hardy was a very prolific author, as he wrote numerous novels, short stories and poems. He was a late Victorian writer, born into a poor rural community of England, and most famous for being a *fin-de-siècle* author, in-between two very different centuries and cosmovisions, namely, the second half of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th. The ongoing and monumental changes that took place during these years inevitably brought about a collective anxiety in Hardy's society and works. In a short span of time, England stopped being a country deeply rooted in Victorian values and aesthetics to open itself up to the advent of modernity, this being understood in the widest sense of the term, as it affected all spheres of life: social, political, aesthetic, and philosophical. As a result, uncertainty became one of the most prominent feelings. As Dyhouse says: "Late Victorian society generated an enormous amount of interest in its own pathology. It was an era in which despair and optimism were often closely allied" (75). The despair and optimism that Dyhouse points out were basically due to the same reason: general scepticism as to what the new century would bring about. Thomas Hardy suffered this anxiety in his own flesh, as he was torn apart by opposite forces and convictions.

When talking about Hardy's ideological background, one must always mention the Victorian period as the main context and influence on his work. As is well known, this era was defined by "the evolution of industrial society, the rise of great towns and cities, and dramatic increases in population" (Frawley 403). However, the rapid advance of industrialization also increased the gap between the different classes. Moreover, there was a non-stop exodus from the countryside to the cities, which kept on increasing while more and more peasants and villagers moved off the land for good, thus increasing the differences between people from both places. This gap will be a recurrent theme in most of Hardy's works. On the other hand, industrialization also meant an increase of the

literary levels: “literacy rates increased, print culture proliferated, information abounded, the circulating library took hold, and a mass reading public was born” (Frawley 403). Much aware of all of these changes, Hardy reacted against this ever-increasing individualized society, and strove to nostalgically portray communal rural spaces as the one and only realm in which human beings could become part of a community and feel at one with nature.

Like Wordsworth, he believed that in rustic life ‘the essential passions of the heart find a better soil’ and are ‘less under restraint’ than in urban society. The closer man lives to nature in humility and ignorance the likelier he is to be happy, for knowledge is sorrow. (Chew and Altick 1469)

Dorset, Hardy’s own rural community, would become ‘Wessex’ in his works. Broadly speaking, the inhabitants of Hardy’s fictional world will be much happier than most city individuals, among other things because they do not care about intellectual knowledge: the less a character knows, the bigger the chances for him/her to lead a happy life.

Hardy’s so far mentioned in-betweenness also makes it difficult to pigeonhole him into one single literary movement. Even though he wrote at a time when naturalism was flourishing, most critics do not feel like classifying him within this aesthetic movement: “the question of Hardy’s relation to naturalism has been asked more often than it has been properly answered.” (Newton et al. 29). Although his works often offer a far too realistic, even cruel, society in which the hero or heroine struggles to survive, his characters are not always doomed by predestination, as the choices they make during their lives also play a prominent role in the final denouement. His latest novels, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, might well be given as examples: in the end Tess, as well as Jude, have to face up to their fate, marked by the consequences of their own respective decisions.

These two novels can also be said to illustrate the emergence of the so-called ‘New Woman’ fiction, which became so relevant in the last years of the 19th century. Among other things, they showcase a new kind of women, who could be described as “Heroines who refused to conform to the traditional feminine role, challenged accepted ideals of marriage and maternity, chose to work for a living, or who in any way argued the feminist cause” (Cunningham 3). This new rebellious figure, so recurrent in literature written by late Victorian women writers, strikingly became another important ingredient in Hardy’s latest works. In this way, characters such as Tess (*Tess of the d’Urbervilles*) and Sue Bridehead (*Jude the Obscure*) will be depicted as ‘new women,’ and will be rather misunderstood by society, although quite admired by Hardy.

My analysis will focus on *Jude the Obscure*, Thomas Hardy’s last novel. The publication of this novel was so controversial, and the number of negative critiques it received was no numerous, that Hardy eventually decided to stop writing novels to devote himself to the writing of poetry instead. The novel’s main concerns are: the depiction of the suffocating society in which the protagonist, Jude, is trapped; the questioning of conventional marriage; and the difficult situation of women at the time. In particular, this dissertation will focus on the analysis of the two main women protagonists in the novel, namely, Sue and Arabella. In a society in which women were supposed to be the perfect daughters, mothers and wives, these two characters not only challenge these traditional assumptions, but also question them to the point of advocating totally different feminine roles.

2. Members of the Folk vs. Individuals: Arabella vs. Sue

As was stated before, 'Wessex' is the name that Thomas Hardy gave to the fictional location in which he settled most of his works. Even though Wessex is a fictional setting, it could be located in the southwest part of Great Britain. However, this location not only stands for a mere setting, it also represents a very specific cosmovision, as Simon Gatrell puts it: "Wessex has come to mean the whole culture – predominately rural and pre-industrial" (19). Therefore, Wessex may be interpreted as a response to modern utilitarian England, as Hardy's nostalgic attempt to preserve old rural England's values and way of life.

An in-depth analysis of Hardy's novels soon discloses a clear-cut categorization of characters. Dorothy Van Ghent, to mention but one well-known Hardy scholar, suggested a division between 'the members of the folk' and 'the individuals,' and described each group as endowed with specific characteristics. The first ones will be defined as "the tenacious, the colonial, the instinctive [...] In their fatalism lies the survival wisdom" (Van Ghent 206), whereas the second group will be described as characters "cut off from community [that have] been individualized by intellectual education or by material wealth and traditionless independence" (209). As regards women in *Jude the Obscure*, a clear distinction can be established between Arabella and Sue. Whereas Arabella belongs to the folk, Sue stands out as an individual. Consequently, both of them represent opposite, although paradoxically complementary, forces in Jude's life. Throughout the novel Jude will strive to leave the folk in order to become an individual, which will only bring him suffering and unhappiness in the end.

Although Sue Bridehead's roots were the same as Jude's –they were both born and raised in Marygreen– she soon abandoned the place with no intention to return. The first time that the name of Sue appears in the novel is when Miss Fawley states that Jude

“is crazy for books [and] his cousin Sue is just the same” (Hardy 9). With regard to Sue, Miss Fawley says: “I have not seen the child for years, though she was born in this place, within these four walls, as it happened” (Hardy 9). The fact that the first thing that the novel mentions about Sue is her passion for knowledge automatically endows her with a very specific personality. Even though she was meant to be a member of the folk on account of her birthplace, from the very beginning she strove to become a self-sufficient individual. In order to achieve this, she rejected the ‘safety’ that belonging to a self-contained community entails, together with the superstitions and fatalism that haunt most members of the folk, in order to follow the individual’s solitary, critical and difficult path.

This is one of the first impressions that Jude has about Sue: “He could perceive that though she was a country-girl at bottom, a latter girlhood of some years in London, and a womanhood here, had taken all rawness out of her” (Hardy 76). As this quotation shows, although Sue’s origins were those of a member of the folk, she no longer belongs to this group. By moving from the countryside to the city, she has developed an individual personality, rather different from the folk’s collective notion of existence. This is how Van Ghent explains what being an individual, in contrast to belonging to the folk, implies:

the deracinated ones [...] who are morally individualized and who are therefore able to suffer isolation, alienation, and abandonment, or to make others so suffer; the folk, while they remain folk, cannot be individually isolated, alienated, or lost, for they are amoral and their existences colonial rather than personal. (205)

Sue clearly fits into the former definition. She is able to understand the harsh reality of the society she lives in, and consequently suffers and makes the people around her suffer

too. Sue leaves Marygreen and her folk community, and her experiences in the city eventually turn her into an individual.

Another remarkable aspect about Sue is the fact that she is first introduced in the novel by other characters rather than by herself. First, by Miss Fawley, and then by Jude. While looking at one photograph of hers, Jude describes Sue as “a pretty girlish face, in a broad hat with radiating folds under the brim like the rays of a halo” (Hardy 65). Sue is therefore portrayed by him as some kind of ‘ethereal’ figure. The fact that Jude first sees her on a picture already suggests what their relationship will be like: one in which she will be constantly idealized by him, which will in turn provide her with the power to choose the destiny of both. After all, a picture represents something that is not real, a frozen moment in the life of a person, the idealization of an instant in someone’s life. And this is what Sue is: an idealized woman in Jude’s eyes. It is made clear that Jude idealizes Sue without even knowing her, which will lead him to put her on a pedestal unconditionally.

As Heilman affirms, “Sue’s original role, of course, is that of counterpoint to Arabella: spirit against flesh” (307). In contrast to the presentation that Jude provides of the delicate Sue, Arabella introduces herself to the reader, and also to Jude, when she throws “a piece of flesh, the characteristic part of a barrow-pig” to Jude’s ear (Hardy 30). This action says it all about her personality and way of acting. From the very beginning, Arabella uses her seduction powers to trap Jude and make him want her, and not once, but twice. She is, without doubt, the character that best represents the folk. She is a survivor; she will fight throughout the novel in order to survive. Arabella might thus be said to illustrate Darwin’s theory of evolution, which so much influenced Hardy’s thought, as DeMille explains: “Darwin had found that rather than a static standard form, the living organism was continually metamorphosing and adapting itself to its

environment as a necessity for survival” (698). Thus, Arabella could be said to corroborate Darwin’s evolutionist theories on the survival of the fittest, as she is the character most willing to adapt to the circumstances that surround her in order to stay alive.

Quoting Van Ghent’s words when referring to the members of the folk, Arabella could be described as “the earth’s pseudopodia, another fauna; and because they are so deeply rooted in the elemental life of the earth – like a sensitive animal extension of the earth itself – they share the authority of the natural” (205). This can be seen in the description that Jude gives when he first sees her: “a fine dark-eyed girl, not exactly handsome, but capable of passing as such at a little distance, despite some coarseness of skin and fibre. [...] She was a complete and substantial female animal” (Hardy 30). Arabella is literally described as if she were an animal. And like a wild thing, she will use her instincts as a tool for survival. To give another example, while Jude and Arabella are still married for the first time, they have to kill a pig they have been fattening throughout the autumn. Seeing that the pig-killer does not arrive, Arabella takes the lead and makes Jude help her into killing the pig by themselves. As a member of the folk and unlike Jude, she shows no compassion for the animal, and justifies herself by saying: “Pigs must be killed [...] Poor folks must live” (Hardy 53). Survival is always Arabella’s priority.

Moreover, if Jude’s descriptions of the two women are compared, it can be concluded that they are antagonistic characters. And yet, both will be necessary for Jude’s development and maturity. They complement each other while tearing Jude apart: “Arabella and Sue correspond to Jude’s body and soul, his sense and intellect, his earthly durability and his airy fragility” (Beckman 82). Sue, the fragile and delicate advocate of the New Women, who can nonetheless put forward a harsh critique of society, versus

Arabella, the female animal, ready to pave her own path using what it takes to guarantee her comfort and survival.

Even though Hardy's writings could seem to be packed with meaningless coincidences, this is a false impression, as every single detail matters. The names given to the female characters can be seen as an example. As Daniel R. Schwarz points out: "Rereading *Jude*, we see aspects of a dark fairy tale" (41), in which names often have some kind of hidden meaning. As regards Arabella Donn and Sue (Susanna) Bridehead, their names already suggest what these two women will be like. Arabella's name contains 'bella,' meaning beautiful in several languages. Although this name somehow points to her attributes as a woman, she, as is later on revealed in the novel, is quite intelligent and strong, and will use these weapons in her own benefit. On the other hand, Sue's real whole name (this is revealed in the letters she sends to Jude) is Susanna Florence Mary Bridehead. As is well known, Susanna is the biblical name of a fair Hebrew wife who was falsely accused of promiscuity by lecherous voyeurs ('la casta Susana'), Florence was a Roman martyr, and Mary automatically brings to mind the figure of the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, her surname Bridehead "combines maidenhead, to emphasize her frigidity, with her resistance to conventional marriage or even cohabitation" (Schwarz 41-42). Sue's names give the reader clear hints about her personality and foresee how her purity and chastity will be venerated by Jude.

3. New Women and the Institution of Marriage

As was argued before, Sue Bridehead encapsulates the figure of the heroine in the New Woman fiction of the late Victorian period. She is an early feminist, and thus a polemical character with multiple contradictions; a woman with ideals that were ahead of her time. The fact that she, in contrast with the other characters, is intellectually advanced, will inevitably bring about much suffering, not only to her, but also to those who care for her. Kathleen Blake accurately defines what this character exemplifies: “Sue Bridehead is a free woman but a repressive personality, sophisticated but infantile, passionate but sexless, independent but needing men, unconventional but conventional” (706). Everything in her is conflictive and paradoxical: while being with Jude, she will feel beset by doubt and will lack enough courage to stay with him till the very end; she will constantly wonder if what they are doing is the correct thing, and will eventually leave Jude, and this in spite of knowing that he is her real true love.

Sue is, without doubt, the most critical character in the novel. However, this does not mean that Arabella, the other woman under analysis, has nothing to say against society. The three main issues that the novel tackles are marriage, educational institutions and religion. The fact that it is women who are in charge of denouncing social injustices points to Hardy’s intentions when writing this novel. He chose to portray two fictional women and made them powerful by giving them voice. However, as the following quotation shows, many of his contemporary critics did not see things like this:

In 1895 *Jude the Obscure* appeared as the climax to a fierce attack made through popular fiction on the Victorian concept of the feminine character and the position of women, and Hardy’s reputation was severely damaged by his association with what was considered to be the vulgar sensationalism of “the fiction of Sex and the New Woman.” (Cunningham 178)

The main topics that are dealt with and questioned in the novel, not only by men, but also and more importantly by women, were not perceived as decent and reasonable by most readers and critics. The critical attitude that *Jude the Obscure* presents was not well received, mainly on account of its connection with the so-called 'New Woman literature.' It must also be noticed that, although this analysis mainly focuses on the two female protagonists, it is also a fact that Sue and Arabella sometimes find allies in Jude and Phillotson, the two main male characters.

Sue's function in the novel is to open up Jude's eyes to the reality in which they live. From the very beginning, Jude's dream is to study. Christminster is 'the New Jerusalem' for him. In the fictional world of Wessex, this is a university city, the equivalent to the real city of Oxford. However, Sue has a very different opinion about this place. In a conversation with Jude in which they address the topic of the educational system, she states:

It is an ignorant place. [...] You are one of the very men Christminster was intended for when the colleges were founded; a man with a passion for learning, but no money, or opportunities, or friends. But you were elbowed off the pavement by the millionaires' sons. (Hardy 129)

She, knowing how the society they live in works, does not hesitate to confront Jude with harsh facts. In keeping with her thoughts, Jude will eventually have to give up his dream of studying at university because background implied fate, in other words, he was poor and thus socially unsuitable to achieve this. Sue will be the one who will make Jude realize that they, as original members of the folk, are condemned to lead a hard and discriminatory life. In tune with this, Heilmann states: "all that Jude believes in and holds dear she attacks with an unrestraint that ranges from inconsiderateness to condescension to an outright desire to wound" (312). Sue, in her attempts to open Jude's eyes to reality,

can also be rather hurtful. And yet, there is no other way in which Sue can tell her cousin how predestined to suffering they are. She must be cruel if she wants him to believe in her. She might be mistaken as being merciless, while she is only trying to be realistic and pragmatic.

As was mentioned before, another important theme in this novel is marriage. Marriage as an institution is first questioned by Jude when he realizes that he does not want to stay with Arabella, just as Arabella does not want to remain with him as his wife. Jude felt “ruined by the fundamental error of their matrimonial union: that of having based a permanent contract on a temporary feeling which had no necessary connections with affinities that alone render a life-long comradeship tolerable” (Hardy 57). Jude is in favour of divorce: when love comes to an end, separation is the honest answer. Nothing lasts forever. Moreover, he becomes aware of the mistake he made when marrying Arabella, who has trapped him in a marriage that is only based on lust and lies.

Sue also has her own say in this matter, but her attitude is, on the whole, rather ambivalent, as she is sometimes driven by her instincts while some other times sticks to what she thinks is the right thing to do. This ambiguity can especially be seen in her relations with men and her instability in marriage. It could be concluded that Sue does not comply with the conventional established marriage rules. At the beginning of the novel, Jude discovers that Sue has promised Phillotson that she will marry him after she finishes her studies. She agrees to marry him because she thinks she owes him this, not because she is in love with him. As soon as they marry, she realizes the mistake she has made, as all she wants to do is live with Jude. She finds herself trapped in an impasse, in a situation without an exit. Sue consequently changes her mind and asks her husband to let her go with Jude, to which he agrees. Her lack of clarity as regards her wishes and decisions inevitably arouses contradictory emotions among readers.

Marriage was a recurrent topic in most New Woman novels of this period. Whereas some went as far as to advocate the so-called 'free love,' others spoke in favour of celibacy. Notwithstanding differences, what most of them have in common is their rejection of traditional marriage (Deresiewicz 59). In *Jude the Obscure*, Sue seems to defend both extremes. What she really desires is really uncertain. At one point in the novel, after having had an argument with Jude, Sue makes him recite the lines from Shelley's poem 'Epipsychidion' but, realizing that Jude is not as literate as she is, she finally recites them herself. The fact that she chooses this poet and this poem is revealing as well as confusing. The poem is, on the whole, a hymn to free love, yet Sue often fights for celibacy because she thinks that sexual relationships will ruin her relationships with men. However, this is not the only reference to Shelley in the novel. When Phillotson is asking for advice to his friend as to letting go of his wife, he describes the lovers, that is, Sue and Jude, as 'Shelleyan.' This simply emphasizes how people regarded them: as a couple that contravened and defied conventional rules. As could not be otherwise, their defiance will be finally punished with a tragic end.

Arabella, the other woman in question, has a rather different approach to marriage. As a member of the folk, marriage will be another weapon she will use to guarantee her survival. Her first marriage with Jude was born out of the necessity of having someone to love her. It could be concluded that her first marriage only catered to her sexual needs. Her 'illegal' second marriage in Australia will not be that different from the first. The man she meets in the colonies convinces her to marry him by insisting on telling her how beautiful she is. Also and even more important, this man can offer her a comfortable life because he owns a hotel. Arabella's instinctive behaviour will make her accept his offer without telling him that she is already married with Jude in England. She, in a conversation with Sue, will make it clear how she understands marriage: "Life with a man

is more business-like after it, and money matters work better. [...] I'd advise you to get the business legally done as soon as possible" (Hardy 236). Arabella refers to marriage as if it merely were some kind of business. She, aware of the position women hold in society, regards marriage as a practical affair. Paradoxically, in the case of Arabella, marriage provides her with the freedom she was desperately looking for.

After having heard what Arabella thinks about marriage, Sue concludes: "What Arabella has been saying to me has made me feel more than ever how hopelessly vulgar an institution legal marriage is – a sort of trap to catch a man" (Hardy 237). She consequently makes up her mind and decides that Jude and she would be much better off if they do not marry. On the one hand, their family is said to be unsuited for marriage; every single marriage in their family has ended up in disgrace. On the other, Sue has come to realize that marriage might be a quagmire in the society they live. However, the novel falls into a catch-22 situation when, clearly contravening these convictions, finally offers an ending that complies with the established moral standards of the moment. No matter how hard one tries to be ahead of one's times, society will always win in the end. As William R. Goetz put it:

In *Jude*, Hardy goes one step farther by allowing divorce to occur, but then shows that it offers no lasting solution, so that the novel can conclude only after both protagonists have re-entered marriages with their original partners in a sort of grotesque parody of the conventionally happy ending of the earlier English novel.

(191)

The number of marriages and divorces is really shocking: there are five official marriages and two divorces between the main characters in the novel. Taking this into account, one might agree with Goetz that Hardy's main intention was to mock the institution of

marriage and the conventional happy ending that demanded that closure should go hand in hand with marriage.

4. The Tragic Ending

Jude the Obscure ends tragically with Jude's death. After being abandoned by Sue, Jude enters a downfallen spiral of misery and desolation. This deterministic ending undoubtedly leaves readers with a pessimistic feeling. Unlike Jude, Sue and Arabella manage to stay alive, although with rather different closures. Van Ghent's characterization will prove accurate till the very end of the novel. Sue, the individual, will always be a lonely and isolated character that will suffer and make other people suffer, whereas Arabella's strong instincts allow her to succeed and survive.

Even though Sue manages to make it to the end of the novel, her finale could be said to be even harder than Jude's. She has to deal with the death of all of her children. After this tragic episode, she comes to the conclusion that awful things are happening to her because she is being living with Jude outside wedlock, that is, without marrying him. She starts to feel the weight of society on her shoulders, which leads her to take the decision to leave Jude and return to her first husband, Phillotson. The final sentences that Jude pronounces summarize their ending as a couple: "Perhaps the world is not illuminated enough for such experiments as ours! Who were we, to think we could act as pioneers!" (Hardy 312), or "Our ideas were fifty years too soon to be any good to us" (355). Society has won the battle against free-willing individuals. Jude and Sue pay the price for their daring attempt to live outside the rigid established social order.

Sue immolates herself when she gives herself up to Phillotson. She forces herself to have sexual relationships with a husband she does not love as her last sacrifice and penance to make up for all the wrong things and sins she thinks she has committed in life. Sue's body reveals how she is actually feeling: "A quick look of aversion passed over her face" (Hardy 353). Mrs. Edlin summarizes what Sue's marriage with Phillotson is going to be like when she sentences: "Weddings be funerals" (353).

Sue is, without doubt, the most complex character; she evolves and changes throughout the novel. As Heilman argued: “Sue is consistently one thing and then another. [...] The portrayal of her is the major achievement of the novel” (309). She is ‘the individual’ par excellence in the novel. Her critical view of society will make her life utterly miserable. D. H. Lawrence went as far as to say:

they [individualistic female characters] were not at war with God, only with society [...] and all the while by their own souls they were right. And the judgement of man killed them [...] transgression against the social code worked their irrevocable fate. (178)

Sue feels trapped in a society that judges her, she tries to fight against it but in the end she succumbs into doing what she thinks is right. Also, although her ending is not actual death, the final stages of her life become a metaphorical funeral. She literally suffers life-in-death by staying with Phillotson.

On the other hand, Arabella mourns the death of her second husband, Mr. Cartlett, to quickly trick Jude to marry her again. This will be the third time she bamboozles a man to marry her. To make matters worse, at the end of the novel Arabella flirts with Jude’s doctor, Vilbert: “Well! Weak women must provide for a rainy day. And if my poor fellow upstairs do off – as I supposed he will soon – it’s well to keep chances open. And I can’t pick and choose now as I could when I was younger. And one must take the old if one can’t get the young” (Hardy 356). Arabella always looks for a solution to her problems. Her husband is in bed dying, but she needs to provide for her future. The novel ends two days after Jude’s death, which somehow means that, even if the protagonist has passed away, life goes on for those who, like Arabella, are still alive and willing to live. She has the most ‘promising’ ending of all the characters in the novel. As Lesley Goodman states:

In the final scene of the novel, however, resistance can take another form: we can refuse to judge Arabella for choosing to join the celebration during Jude's death, for trying not to let Jude's death ruin her good time, and for moving on with her life immediately. It is Arabella's escapism – her refusal to respect the dignity of Jude's death – that has the potential to make this scene morbid, but only if we choose. (172)

Arabella stands for the fighter, the survivor. Her life has not been easy, but she is always looking for solutions with the hope that they will bring her happiness or, at least, peace and comfort. This is why, much to the readers' surprise, she cares more about her future than Jude's impending death; she soon starts looking for another man in order to marry or simply have a good time with him.

For some readers, Arabella could be seen as the ultimate antagonist in the novel, the main obstacle to Sue and Jude's love. However, a rather different perspective might in turn lead to admire her strength and determination. In any case, what is undeniable is that her character does not leave readers indifferent. As Goodman saw it:

As a paradigm for rebellious identification, rebelliously identifying with Arabella involves not only the possibility of choice and rebellion but also a series of ethical issues. It means valuing pragmatism, optimism, resilience, sexuality, the bodily, and the physical. (173)

However hard one may try to defend her decisions for the sake of survival, it is clear that Arabella lacks any kind of moral code: she marries three times in the novel, and the three times she employs tricks and ruses to make men marry her. Arabella, as a character, undergoes no evolution. She remains the same from beginning to end. It seems that being a flat character allows her to triumph in the end, as if success could only be possible when

one only cares for oneself, remaining completely immune to, and unaffected by, whatever society might believe or say. Significantly, it is Arabella who speaks last. She has a conversation with Mrs. Edlin in front of Jude's dead body, in which she makes it clear that Sue will never be happy again, because she left Jude, her one and only love:

‘tis to be believed she's found forgiveness somewhere! She said she had found peace!’

‘She may swear that on her knees to the holy cross upon her necklace till she's hoarse, but it won't be true!’ said Arabella. ‘She's never found peace since she left his arms, and never will again till she's as he is now!’ (Hardy 362)

The fact that Arabella is the only character in the novel that is allowed to have a happy ending says it all. The members of the folk are, without doubt, the fittest, and thus the only ones that can survive and enjoy some kind of happy life. It could be argued that, in *Jude the Obscure*, society partly mimics biology. The members of the folk, however uneducated and ignorant they may be, are the only ones fit for survival: “Certainly in the Wessex novels, all but the average people die” (Lawrence 180). Not in vain are the last words in the novel uttered by a survivor.

5. Conclusion

Jude the Obscure is a novel that was harshly criticized when it was first published in 1895. It is the last written novel by the author, Thomas Hardy who, from that moment onwards, decided to devote himself to writing poetry instead. Thomas Hardy's novels wonderfully illustrate the anxiety, uncertainty and crisis of values that the *fin de siècle* inevitably brought about. Although *Jude the Obscure*'s plot mainly revolves around Jude's struggle to make his intellectual dream come true, the novel also deals with other important and related topics such as marriage, religious institutions, and the hypocritical and suffocating late Victorian society.

Even though Jude seems to be the protagonist, there are other two female figures, namely, Sue and Arabella, who will play a prominent role in his evolution as a character and the unravelling of the plot. As the novel tries to suggest, it is these two women, in their respectively different ways, who are the real fighters in late Victorian society. In a word, the true protagonists of the story. The novel tries to bring this to the fore when concluding: "Strange that his first aspiration – towards academic proficiency – had been checked by a woman, and that his second aspiration – towards apostleship – had also been checked by a woman" (188). Whereas Sue embodies the figure of the individual and the New Woman, Arabella, the survivor, represents the values of old rural England that are bound to disappear. As regards marriage, Sue questions the institution but finally fails to live beyond its constraints, whereas for Arabella marriage is simply a business, a question of mere survival.

Both women will survive Jude. Sue will end up her days living unhappily with Phillotson in her own chosen jail. After reaching the conclusion that being with Jude without being married was wrong, she decides to do what is morally 'correct' and live a miserably yet conscious life. Arabella will remain the same strong woman from the

beginning until the end. As a member of the folk, she will always look for survival on all occasions, including her own husband's death. In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy chooses to offer a Darwinian end: only the fittest manage to adapt to society's norms and survive. Yet, even more importantly, the novel also makes it clear that being the fittest does not necessarily mean being the best.

6. Works Cited

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